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ABSTRACT

Throughout the country, organizations of intellectuals (most of them called Independent Scholars' Roundtables) meet to discuss issues of importance to them. The participants share knowledge, problem-solving methods, and experiences. The groups may be organized around a particular discipline or they may be interdisciplinary. They are typically open to all interested parties, although some have adopted more stringent criteria for membership. Individuals and groups frequently develop programs to bring their interests to the larger community. There are presently about 40 such organizations with a total membership of about 1,500. The address and telephone number of the Independent Scholarship Project director are provided. (DC)

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A MEETING OF MINDS

by Ronald Gross

Innovation Abstracts; v5 n18 June 17, 1983

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A MEETING OF MINDS

"When you teach part-time as I do, you come in, do your classes, and leave. There's no chance for colleagueship or for the play of the mind among peers. It's draining. I give out, and I don't get certain kinds of feedback that can only come from colleagues. But since I helped organize our Roundtable, I've been in touch with kindred spirits. Plus, the meetings and newsletter keep me clued in to additional teaching opportunities, funding possibilities, and events on other campuses. The group's a source of strength, and a useful resource."

This testimonial typifies the reactions of participants in similar do-it-yourself organizations of intellectuals throughout the country (most of them called Independent Scholars' Roundtables), many encouraged and helped under two Fund grants. Such groups have been started by regular, part-time, and adjunct faculty, as well as by "independent scholars"--unaffiliated persons doing serious intellectual work, such as teaching or research, off-campus.

Through the roundtables, leading independent investigators in the arts and sciences reveal how they identify and solve problems. They share their expert knowledge on such matters as access to libraries and computer data banks, funding sources for non-affiliated scholars, disciplinary networks, conferences, and universities, and on how to disseminate work through nontraditional media.

Discussion focuses on the tradition of independent inquiry--Darwin, Freud, Marx, as examples--and on contemporary independent scholars such as Buckminster Fuller, Lewis Mumford, Edmund Wilson, Eric Hoffer, Arthur Koestler, and Frances FitzGerald.

This burgeoning "independent sector" in the world of learning is diverse and far-flung. Some groups serve a particular discipline, such as the Independent Scholars of Asia (Berkeley), the Association of Independent Historians of Art (N.Y.), or the Institute for Historical Study (S.F.). Others are interdisciplinary, such as the Princeton Research Forum, the Alliance of Independent Scholars (Boston), the Center for Independent Study (New Haven), and the Rocky Mountain Women's Institute (Denver).

Some have been launched by individuals banding together, others by diverse organizations. In Madison, Wisconsin and in the state of Montana, groups have been created by think-tanks. In Los Angeles and in Boston, the lead was taken by non-traditional postsecondary institutions. In Wichita, Providence, and Denver, community-based continuing education agencies provided the spark. In Minneapolis-St. Paul and Hartford, it was the state humanities councils.

The kinds of feelings and spirit evoked in these groups is suggested by the headlines on the newspaper stories about them: SCHOLARSHIP IS THEIR JOY, NOT THEIR JOB; SCHOLARS GROUP GIVES FEEDBACK; HELP ARRIVES FOR BLUE-COLLAR SCHOLARS; WHEN YOU FALL IN LOVE WITH A SUBJECT. It's a spirit similar to that of the French salons and the British scientific societies of the 17th and 18th centuries, of Ben Franklin's "Junto," of the Lyceums of the 19th century--all of which developed

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outside the academic bureaucracies of their time. Typically, such groups are open to all, requiring only a lively mind, a serious concern with one's intellectual field, and active involvement in the group's activities--though some groups adopt more stringent criteria for membership. The subjects of concern are often ones neglected within academe, and are likely to be practical. Individuals and groups frequently develop public programs to bring their interests to the broader community.

> As the New York Times article on the project points out,
> "In many cases, the fruits of independent scholarship have eventually been absorbed into college and university curriculums. Experimental schools and community colleges have often been the first to incorporate these new disciplines, which include environmental studies, women's studies and public interest research.
>
> Interest in independent scholars and concern for their welfare has developed since the late 70's, when many young faculty members lost their jobs. More recent budget cuts have forced other institutions to tighten their belts and deny tenure to more scholars who are now resigned to unemployment or underemployment."

Some observers of the phenomenon have seen important implications in this fresh approach to mutual support for the life of the mind. "If humanity is to pass safely through its present crisis on earth, it will be because a majority of individuals are now doing their own thinking," says Buckminster Fuller. "This Project has pioneered in improving the climate for such thinking in the United States." Alvin Toffler, author of Future Shock and The Third Wave, comments: "Independent scholars, thinkers, researchers, and scholars make striking, creative contributions to our understanding of the world around us. This Project shows how each of us can play an exhilarating part in that process."

There are presently about forty independent scholars' organizations around the country, with an estimated total membership of 1,500 (a few have hundreds, but a number of new ones have only 15 or 20). The Independent Scholarship Project coordinates a National Support Network for mutual assistance, and helps new groups start and develop. Its report on the whole field, Independent Scholarship: Promise, Problems, and Prospects, has just been published by The College Board.

Ronald Gross, Director
The Independent Scholarship Project

For further information, write to the author at 17 Myrtle Drive, New York, NY 11021 (516)487-0235. The Project welcomes opportunities to visit campuses to present and discuss its findings, and to help initiate local activities which then receive continued technical assistance from the national project.

KAREN WATKINS, EDITOR
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